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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role and preparation of academics for senior management and executive positions in colleges and universities, particularly in Australia. A background section cites trends in higher education management and recent critiques of that management and the consequent scrutiny of leadership effectiveness. There follows an exploration of four dimensions of higher education leadership: symbolic, political, managerial, and academic. The argument is made that the symbolic and political dimensions are currently being overshadowed by an emphasis on the academic and managerial dimensions. The central section of the paper looks at the relationship between the academic and managerial dimensions of higher education leadership: whether they represent a continuum or a dichotomy, and their relationship in a climate of change where senior leaders lacking managerial skill are under pressure to change. The paper argues that leaders are being increasingly expected to behave as the leader or chief executive officer of large enterprises operating in a changing environment. These trends suggest a need for the professional development of senior management as well as a clarification of what institutional leadership in the context of higher education actually entails. Includes 20 references. (JB)

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS:

ACADEMIC LEADERS OR BUSINESS MANAGERS ?

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Abstract:

The need for business management skills in higher education institutions has now been highlighted in three recent Australian Governement Papers. In the light of these reports, this paper explores the issue of the preparation of academics for senior management and executive positions in colleges and universities. Both the individual and the institutional aspects of this issue will be canvassed.

BACKGROUND

Like many other countries, Australia has seen an increasing challenge from government to the management and administration of its higher education institutions. Two significant documents for higher education policy makers in Australia: *Higher Education: a policy discussion paper* (1987) and *Higher Education: a policy statement* (1988) questioned the management acumen of those who are in charge of our higher education institutions. Both documents claim that while many higher education institutions have grown extremely large and manage budgets equivalent to large businesses, management has not improved its effectiveness to meet their challenge. Other criticisms have included the need to identify systematic barriers to institutional responsiveness and to eliminate cumbersome decision-making. In a more recent document *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990's (1991),* the Federal Minister for Higher Education and Employment services again called for the development of "Quality Management" which he defined as strategic planning, performance monitoring and review (1991:31).

Such criticism is not without some foundation, as Moses and Roe illustrate:

> *Heads in our University as in many other institutions of higher education grow into their job; there is no job description, no list of activities heads must perform or decisions they must take. Nevertheless, some of what a head does is mandatory, and*

tradition, custom, and expectations influence other activities to varying extents.

(1985:115)

Anecdotal statements such as that by Moses and Roe reflect the perceptions of many people when former academics are promoted into executive management positions in Higher Education Institutions. The maxim of a "good student implies good lecturer; good professor implies good administrator" while perhaps outdated in theory, still appears to be reflected in the reality of senior academic appointments. At the same time it must be acknowledged that there is little evidence to substantiate or refute comments on the quality of management of higher educational institutions in Australia. As Lonsdale and Bardsley (1984) and Smith (1990) indicate, frequent discussion of the issues has appeared in the literature; yet it seems that over time, little action has been taken. As Boldt suggested (1991:12), it may be easier to adopt "drift strategies" and not face the changes.

As suggested by the three papers, the expectations of leadership and management in higher education institutions is under the spotlight in the search for quality. In examining the issue, the four dimensions along which Trow (1985) suggested that higher education leadership is exercised, offer a useful framework. These four dimensions: symbolic, political, managerial and academic are not necessarily discrete but do help reveal the different tensions within higher education institutions and

suggest why a pure business model is not appropriate. Effective action in all areas requires that the senior manager, for example, a vice-chancellor, has the legal authority and resources to act, to choose among alternatives, even to create alternatives, in short, to exercise discretion. Without that discretion and the authority and resources behind it, a senior manager cannot exercise leadership, whatever his or her personal qualities. What is open to debate is the balance of priorities among these dimensions in the performance of a particular role[1]. Of the four, it is suggested here that the symbolic and political dimensions, while important, are currently being overshadowed by an emphasis on the academic and managerial dimensions.

SYMBOLIC DIMENSION

Symbolic leadership, as described by Trow (1985:143) is reflected in the ability to project the character of the institution in the most effective way. Such opportunities arise at graduation ceremonies. Here the colourful pomp and ceremony portray to the community at large the successful passage of graduates while at the same time providing a public platform to articulate the success of the institution. The Occasional Address often serves to explain and justify institutional decisions through linking teaching, research and community involvement.

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[1]While terms as Vice-Chancellor, Director, Principal and Chief Executive Officer appear in the literature, for consistency, unless stated otherwise, the term senior management is used as an all encompassing term in this paper to refer to those academics who hold senior management and executive positions.

Positive reports of a dynamic institution's achievements is an important key in its attractiveness to and recruitment of, able staff and students. Already held in awe by many of its supporters, public statements by a senior officer of both staff and students' successes help reinforce a climate of academic excellence not only internally but also externally. Such action effectively helps to shape the institution's own image and its image as perceived by the wider community.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

Trow (1985:143) refers to political leadership as the ability to resolve the conflicting demands and pressures, exerted both internally and externally, by those with a claimed vested interest in the institution's goals and mission. Recent changes within the Australian higher education arena suggests this dimension has increased in prominence. What is seen by many academic staff as direct government intervention and control in institutional affairs, usually through financial avenues, has higher education institution managers engaging in public debate and confrontation with political leaders. Often the issue is related to finance but is represented in arguments over academic freedom and the quality of teaching, research and scholarship. As a senior officer in a publicly funded organisation, such debate often puts the individual in a precarious and truly political position. Unlike his/her business counterpart, the chief executive officer is limited in making difficult decisions in terms of budget and personnel.

ACADEMIC DIMENSION

Traditionally, this is the dimension along which senior management excelled. This is stark contrast to the business leader who is more likely to have attained their senior position through a long experience in management. From the evidence available, many senior staff in universities are not professional administrators but academics who have excelled in teaching and research within a particular discipline (Taylor, 1987). This is supported by Sloper (1986) who suggested a career as an academic in science is more likely to enhance one's rise to a deputy vice-chancellor's position. He also raised the interesting question whether scientists lead better organised academic lives or are better executive material than academics from other fields. The suggestion made and supported by data is that scientific teaching and research attract those means more likely for a successful academic career than areas such as humanities. Research grants and the dominance of a research culture together with the potential for increasing institutional income ensure management skills are not always a priority (Scott, 1987:168).

MANAGERIAL DIMENSION

This fourth dimension, while seemingly ignored for many years, has emerged as an issue high on the Australian government's agenda. By its very nature, a dilemma exists in the responsibility of senior management. In looking at organisational change at the University of Melbourne,

Deacon and Huntington (1987:176) noted that Deputy Vice-Chancellors were appointed primarily as policy-makers and planners, rather than as managers. They also concluded that it would be inappropriate to allocate substantial managerial functions to them, particularly those of a routine nature, as it would be likely to have the effect of reducing the amount of time available to them for policy and planning functions.

Likewise, Scott, a former vice-chancellor, saw part of the difficulty resting in the excessive mix of responsibilities:

> *Carrying many cans put overwhelming pressure on chief executives to undertake onerous tasks which were not envisaged when they were appointed and for which they may have neither training or aptitude.*
>
> *(1987:168)*

CONTINUUM OR DICHOTOMY ?

It is the relationship between the academic and managerial dimensions on which this paper will now focus. The statements in the three government papers referred to earlier, appear to imply that the two dimensions lie together on a continuum with the effective senior manager able to move easily from the academic to the managerial. A single role which combined the academic role with the managerial may have once been possible, but with the emergence of considerably larger institutions

through amalgamations and consolidations, the academic and managerial dimensions have become more a dichotomy.

As an example, Smith (1990:249) referred to the "balancing act" where the chief executive officer endeavoured to act responsibly to both governing bodies and to their academic community. This inherent tension is not new. Moses and Roe (1985:118) noted that in other countries, particularly North America, it is openly recognised that learning-on-the-job takes too long, and is wasteful of time and opportunities. Yet the traditional career path does not encourage the aspiring academic leader to seek formal study and development in management but rather the traditional research and publication criteria. Two examples reinforce this perception. At a recent gathering attended by the writer, a vice-chancellor made the proud claim that his university had made its first promotion to Associate Professor based mainly on the applicant's administrative ability. While this could be interpreted as a sign of changing times, all other promotions were on research criteria. Again, a recent newspaper article (Bosworth, 1990:24) reported a university head of department claiming kudos because his department had produced more publications than another.

For the aspiring academic leader, the path is not easy. In seeking a senior management position, a first step on the ladder upwards is often to attain a position as head of department. This introduces the incumbent

to new difficulties which require different skills from those of a competent academic scholar. As Moses and Roe (1985:115) suggested, heads are middle management, and literally in the middle between colleagues with whom they have to maintain good relations and the senior administrators who control resources with whom they must also maintain good relations and to whom they are to some extent accountable. Whether two dimensions are compatible and to what degree will depend on many factors, not least of which will include the intentions of the individual.

A CLIMATE OF CHANGE

As suggested earlier, the lack of management training in the necessary skills has been identified (McDonald, 1990:2), with the result that the role of senior management is under challenge and under pressure to change. These pressures are coming from several points.

Around the world in universities, there appears to be a trend for power and influence to move towards central administration, a point noted by Taylor (1987:86). This seems to have been helped by the physical growth of institutions to the stage where professional administrators and managers are being employed. While these appointments relieve the senior academic executive from this area, it also has inherent tension with the control of resources.

Reflecting this point and in looking at other external influences, Scott (1987:168) expressed concern that a market-oriented mentality will undermine academic considerations, as the driving force in tertiary institutions, focussing power on bureaucratic structures and styles of management.

Besides these two pressures, the management of higher education institutions (or the perceived poor quality thereof) has now received attention from the Federal Government as the main funding source. In all three government papers, the management of institutions came under criticism.

All papers made reference to claimed management inefficiencies. These included governing bodies, managerial styles, decision making processes, strategic planning and performance evaluation. While the criticism of the senior management is implied, proof is elusive. Instead, broad statements are offered:

> *Many institutions are extremely large and their budgets are equivalent to those of large business organisation. Their managers are required to exhibit high-level management skills and to show strong leadership in meeting the institution's corporate goals.*
>
> *(Dawkins, 1988:101)*

As such, the statement offers little more than rhetorical and political denunciation while lacking precision and clarity that would assist in grappling with the issue. This is not to deny the criticism but substantiating examples are missing. It seems somewhat confusing in that institutions are being encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own performance and results yet being expected to be strongly managerial in doing so. What this actually means in reality for the senior management is not clear.

It is doubtful whether a business model where senior management show strong leadership through fostering efficiency, setting priorities, promoting a client orientation and undertaking corporate planning and review as suggested by Dawkins (1987:50), is suited to the goals of higher education institutions. However, to counter this position, there is an urgent need to develop alternative models which can be both perceived and proven to be effective and efficient in all key areas of each institution. Rather than just accept, there is a need to learn more about the nature of that claimed continuum between business and academia.

This point was also highlighted by a speaker from the Business Council at a NBEET sponsored conference in Toowoomba early in 1990. Hutton (1990:8) welcomed the emphasis placed in the Green Paper on modern management principles and practices but expressed concern that there was only brief reference to the training, education and development of

institution managers. He claimed that without a significant initiative in this area aimed at senior and middle-level managers, the required shift in individual or institutional performance will not occur. Further, each institution needed to produce a strategy for training, education and development of its own managers. He also suggested that the government should reinforce its commitment to the training, education and development of institution managers.

Another speaker at the same conference, Gregor Ramsey, made a similar statement:

> *In higher education, we will have to reconcile traditional collegial decision-making processes with the demands of larger, more complex, multi-campus institutions. A major management issue will be the push for more productive educational systems and quite different allocations of resources to task than we currently make.*
>
> *(1990:4)*

The situation regarding institutional management is recognised but whether the status quo will actually change remains conjectural. Scott (1987:168) suggested that, in response to market forces, new appointments may be charged with the responsibility of increasing income by "selling" research. To do so would call for different senior management skills. Whether shifting the emphasis to the managerial

dimension at the expense of the academic dimension is in the long term advantageous, remains debateable. Part of this issue is the attempt to impose a business model of management onto institutions. This reflects the assumption that there is little distinction between business organisations and higher education institutions. Rather there is a need to learn more about the nature of that continuum between business and academia.

One essential difference lies in the discretion over budget allocation. While a business can lower costs through staff reduction, the chief executive officer in an institution is confronted with tenured academic staff. While business's restructure internally with apparent ease, higher education institutions are often in both private and public debate over structures and control of scarce resources.

WHERE TO ?

It is appropriate to consider what is believed by some to be needed by senior management. As the previous discussion has suggested, changes are happening and the need for those responsible for appointing senior management to respond to the changing role expectations, is becoming paramount. Linke (1990), in calling for improved institutional management sees part of the improvement arising from good management of the change process. Like Dawkins, he implies that better management would increase efficiency but does not really indicate

efficiency in terms of what. There appears little time or opportunity for senior management to adopt the desired role of senior manager in addition to academic leader. One could question whether these two roles are actually compatible, a question that is explored more recently by Smith (1990). In looking at the nature of this change, Nugent sees the intrinsic nature of the task facing senior management as great:

> *More so than ever before Vice-Chancellors are being called upon to act not just as respected senior academic colleagues or as the chairman in a collegial environment. In addition, they are being asked to behave as the leader or the chief executive officer of a large and formidable enterprise operating in a changing and uncertain environment.*
>
> *(1990:10)*

In a survey of heads of academic departments, Lonsdale and Bardsley (1984) located a number of professional development needs which lends support to Nugent's statement. In their paper, which also makes similar reference to points touched on in this paper, a need for management training is presented. Unlike the Green and White papers, in presenting a strong case for the professional development needs of senior management, a number of identified suggestions are made regarding what should be included in the preparation of senior academic administrators.

A recent report indicates that there is remarkable similarity in the skills needed by the successful business man. In an interview (CPA, 1990), John Abernathy, Chairman and Chief Executive Partner of BDO Seidman, suggested that organisations need focused marketing strategies, real strategic planning, effective recruitment, better organisation and human resource management. While development in these areas may be beneficial to the leaders of higher education institutions, before embarking on their professional development, it is necessary to obtain a clear description and understanding of what leadership in institutions really is, and how it should function. Then, the successful transplant to higher education of relevant practices whose origins lie in another context, could become more acceptable.

SUMMARY

There is little doubt that the management of higher education institutions is undergoing change as they are required to adapt to new circumstances. While there is considerable recognition that the role of those occupying senior positions is changing as their tasks become increasingly difficult, their preparation, apart from experience, appears to remain limited. Yet, despite the criticism, it must be acknowledged that many institutions have been well run for a number of years, making effective use of resources to respond to and cope with, internal and external demands.

Having explored a number of issues, perhaps an appropriate concluding comment is offered by Bacchetti:

> *To manage these entities with skill and grace is no mean achievement, and success requires, in addition to a record of good judgement and wisdom, a region of acceptance and forgiveness around individual decision comparable to what individuals will provide their friends.*
>
> *(1990:105)*

while Lonsdale and Bardsley offer a salutary note:

> *Heads of academic departments probably have one of the most complex and demanding roles in an institution, and the position can often be a lonely one, with significant pressures being experienced from above and below.*
>
> *(1984:123)*

The interplay between the characteristics of the individual, the role and the institutional environment, including government pressure, is complex. To return to the original framework, successful leadership requires a high level of skill in all four dimensions. This paper has attempted to highlight some of the issues in relation to four dimensions of higher education leadership, in particular, the dimensions of academic leader and business

manager. Although briefly touched on, the compatibility of these two roles warrants continued discussion. Suffice to say though, the debate will continue.

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